

## THE EAGLE CLIFF MAIL.

How a Brave Miss Safely Delivered Its Valuable Contents.

For fourteen years 'Old Jed Prouty,' as everybody called him, had carried the mails between the towns of Eagle Cliff and Graniteville, a distance of forty miles and in all that time he had never lost a single trip, a record of which he was very proud. He lived in a lonely gulch, halfway between the two towns, and his daughter, Madge, fifteen years old had been his housekeeper ever since her mother had died—two years before the time our story opens.

She had never had brothers and sisters, and as her father was away from morning till night of every day except Sunday, Madge had a lonely time of it, with the nearest neighbors nearly two miles distant.

But this Madge did not much mind. She had lived amid the mountain fastnesses all her life and had never known what it was to have companions of her own age.

She did not know what fear was. When she was but twelve years old her father had given her a little rifle and taught her how to use it, and when she was but fourteen years old he came home one evening just in time to bring to the house a fine young deer Madge had brought down herself.

Her father's trips were so arranged that he was at home every night with Madge. He would go to Graniteville in the morning, get the mail and return to the cabin by nightfall, and the next day go on to Eagle Cliff, returning home in the afternoon with the mail for Graniteville.

During his absence Madge occupied herself in various ways. Much of her time was spent in making their little cabin of two rooms wonderfully neat and clean.

It was just as cheery and tidy a place as such a rude log house could possibly be, and Jed Prouty found it very restful and comfortable after his ride of forty miles each day.

He came home from Graniteville one night complaining of feeling "tired out."

"I'd hardly stren'th to set in my saddle the last mile or two," he said, as he threw himself down on his bunk, under which he told Madge to put the mail for Eagle Cliff. "I'll get right into bed and take some hot drinks and sleep it all off by morning," he said.

But when morning came he was too sick and weak to hold up his head, and riding to Eagle Cliff was an utter impossibility to him.

"I can't go," he said, with one hand pressed to his burning and throbbing brow—"I can't go, Madge; but that mailbag's got to get to the Cliff somehow. I ain't never failed of gettin' it there a single time in so'teen years, and I wouldn't fail gettin' it there now for all there is in it."

"I could take it, dad, if it want for leavin' you," said Madge, promptly, "but I can't leave you alone, sick as you are."

"You needn't leave me alone, my girl," said her father. "You could stop at the Widder Barton's cabin and ask her to come up and do all there is to be done for me. I reckon you could git some one there to take the mail on to the Cliff, but I don't know nobody I'd trust with it as I'd trust you, Madge."

"Then I'll take it through for you, dad," she replied, "and I'll bring back the doctor, if he'll come, and some medicine, anyhow. I s'pose Mrs. Barton can do for you as well as I could, and if you'd feel safer to have the mail-bag with me than with anybody else, I'll take it through, and you needn't worry none about its not getting there. I'll be in Eagle Cliff by noon, and home by sundown."

"I believe you will, Madge," her father said, proudly; "but it ain't any ordinary mail you'll carry. Yesterday was pay day in Graniteville, and lots of miners sent money home in registered letters, fer you know, there ain't any other way of sending it from there; and them registered letters is all in that mail-bag. Then, some of the boys give me their money to buy money orders fer 'em at the Cliff, and others sent their's over to the bank there. They knowed they could trust yer dad, Madge, and we'll show 'em they can trust his little girl, too."

"So they can, dad," Madge replied, smiling with pleasure at this unusual expression of confidence in her courage and honesty.

"I've nearly five hundred dollars in my belt, Madge, and there's a paper with it tellin' jest who it all belongs to and what's to be done with it; and when you get to the Cliff, you tell Dock Gray, the postmaster, how I'm flat on my back, and give him the paper and the money, and he'll tend to everything fer you, for he's straight as a string, Dock is; an honest man never drewed the breath of life. I kin trust Dock and you, Madge. Now you'd better be off soon as you kin."

Madge did all she could for her father's comfort, and in twenty minutes she was on his trusty horse, with the belt of money buckled tight around her slender waist under her dress, and the mail-bag securely strapped to the saddle behind her.

A second belt was around her waist outside her dress, but under the loose jacket she wore, and from this there hung a pair of pistols she felt sure she could use if need be.

Stopping for a few minutes at the

cabin of widow Barton, two miles distant, she secured her promise to take care of Jed Prouty that day, and then Madge rode swiftly away, determined to cover the eighteen miles between her and Eagle Cliff before noon, if possible.

"Get along, Bally," she said to her horse. "I'm not more'n half so heavy as dad, and you must make better time with me. Get along, sir!"

Madge had been to the Cliff several times and greatly enjoyed the prospect of a visit to the lively little town now, her happiness being dimmed by nothing but the thought of her father's illness, and he had spoken so hopefully and cheerfully of his immediate recovery when she rode away that her fears had been greatly allayed. She had no fear for herself.

She rode almost to the summit of the mountain without meeting a human being or seeing a living creature excepting the little snow-birds flying out and in among the branches of the trees and out across the snow.

Then she met a small, elderly man coming down the trail on a feeble-looking old mule.

Her right hand was laid firmly on the butt of one of her pistols, as he reined up when they met.

"How far is it to the next cabin?" he asked.

"About ten miles," replied Madge.

"Where you bound fer?"

"Eagle Cliff."

"Alone?"

"Yes; excepting for my horse and these."

The man laughed harshly, but his voice was kindly enough as he said:

"Griddy, ain't ye, little gal? Well, if nobody meant you any more harm'n I do you'd be safe without them little pistols at your belt. I got a little gal o' my own, 'bout your age, back in Missouri, an' I wouldn't harm you any more'n I would her. But I reckon it'd skeer her out of a year's growth ter find herself alone up here on this mounting. Good-bye an' the Lord bless ye."

His voice had a genuine ring that assured Madge of his sincerity, and she felt rather ashamed of the display she had made of her weapons.

"Good-bye, sir," she replied; "and I'm much obliged for your good wishes."

She had left the timber behind now, and was allowing old Bally to take his time in going up the steep and snowy trail, bringing them nearer and nearer to the summit of the mountain. She jumped lightly down from his back when near the summit and walked by his side, but when the summit was finally reached, she mounted again and said:

"Now, old fellow, I'll give you five or ten minutes to rest in, and then you must take me flying down to the Cliff in less than—"

"Hello, Miss!"

Madge whirled quickly around in her saddle. The mountain had on its summit many massive boulders, and from behind one of these, close to the roadside, two men had suddenly come.

Courageous as she was, Madge was taken so wholly by surprise that her face paled a little and her voice trembled slightly as she said:

"How do you do?"

"Ain't you lost?" asked one of the men, staring boldly at her from under his bushy eyebrows.

"No, I'm not, Madge replied in a firmer voice.

"Ain't traveling around the country alone, be you?"

"I'm going to Eagle Cliff."

"Oh! ye be? And where mought ye hev come from?"

"From No Man's Gulch, a few miles back here. I live there."

"Oh, ye do, eh? Ye ain't the reg'lar mail-carrier?"

"No."

Madge felt her voice trembling again at this proof that they had noticed the mail-bag.

"My father is the mail-carrier, but he is sick to-day, and I'm carrying it for him. I must ride on, too, or I'll not get back to-night. Good-bye."

And she rode on, not noting the significant looks of the men. But she instinctively felt them to be enemies, and breathed a long breath of relief as she rode around a curve in the trail which hid her from their view.

The decent here was very abrupt, and a gallop of two miles brought Madge to a thick growth of timber.

Looking back as she entered it she saw two men riding furiously down the trail behind her, and she felt confident that they were the men she had met on the mountain's summit.

"They're after me!" was Madge's immediate and correct conclusion. "They want the mail-bag. They wouldn't attack me up there on the summit for fear of being seen by some one going up or coming down. They think it will be an easier job to rob me in the woods. Well, they shan't rob me no place if I can help it. Dad said he trusted me, and there's dozens of men in Graniteville trusting dad and believin' he'll get this mail-bag safe into Eagle Cliff. I'll show 'em dad and me can be trusted! Get on, Bally! Get on, sir—on, on, on!"

Bally responded nobly to his young rider's command, and bounded into the gloomy woods.

Eagle Cliff was yet eight miles away and the nearest cabin was six miles distant. Old Bally was past his prime, and he was still exhausted from his climb up the mountain, and Madge felt his speed decreasing before they had gone a mile.

Reining him up for an instant, she distinctly heard the horses of her pursuers coming on behind her, and she knew that they were riding faster

than old Bally could carry her. A deserted cabin stood a short distance within the wood, and Madge, hastily dismounting, ran into it, leading old Bally after her.

Three minutes later two men rode swiftly by, urging their horses on at their utmost speed.

"But I'm afraid they'll discover my trick and come back to hunt me," said Madge, in the midst of her momentary sense of relief. "There's a long stretch of road where there's no timber a mile or two from here, and when they reach it they'll see I'm not ahead of them and will come back to search for me. What shall I do? I must save the mail-bag in some way."

She took it from Bally's back as she spoke, and leaving the horse in the cabin, she started out to conceal herself and the bag among the boulders until help came over the trail or until she dared go on alone.

Unfamiliar with the dense woods in which she had sought refuge, she wandered about for nearly an hour, when she unexpectedly found herself standing in the road, around the bend of which one of the men suddenly came on foot.

"Ah! he said, exultingly. 'I've ketch'd ye, hev I? Thought ye'd fool us, eh? But we found yer hoss in that old cabin, and put our own up long side of him while we looked ye up. Now, I'll take that air mail-bag an' any vallybles ye happen ter have 'bout ye, an'—"

"Stop!"

He had started to ward her, when Madge, dropping the bag behind her, stood before it with a pistol held out in either hand.

"Stop right where you are," she said. "These pistols are loaded, and I ain't a bit afraid to use them. Don't you try to shoot or I'll get ahead of you! You can't have this mail bag!"

The ruffian burst into a loud laugh at this. "Ha, ha, ha," he roared. "Ye air plucky, ain't ye, little gal? I reely b'leve ye'd pepper me if I tuk a step toward ye. Good fer ye anyhow! I admire yer grit, but I admire that mail-bag more right after a pay day in Graniteville. I reckon, though, I'll have to have help 'fore I git it. Here, Bill—oh, Bill!"

They stood in a sharp curve in the road. A sound of hoofs was heard, and the man called out jeeringly: "Come on Bill, 'fore I get riddled through an' through!"

"Oh! I'm comin' an' my name's Bill, too, but I reckon I ain't the Bill yer yellin' fer. I've an idee this little gal 'll be just as glad ter see me as she would ter see 't'other Bill ain't ye, sis?"

Madge turned to see the old white mule she had met on the other side of the mountain, and sitting astride its bony back was the man who had spoken so kindly to her.

"Good for you, sissy!" he said, as he saw her, pistol in hand. "Pop away if you want to an' I'll c'lar ye for 'fore any joory in America. I'll help ye hold him level till Bill comes. You just keep yer barkers pinterd fair at him while I get him into proper shape."

Dismounting he took some thick cords from his baggage, and while Madge still covered the scoundrel with her pistols, the old man disarmed and bound him until he was utterly helpless.

"Now," he said, "we're ready to extend the right hand of fellowship to Brother Bill an'—here he is."

The evil-looking fellow who had questioned Madge on the mountain now came hurrying around the curve.

"Up with your hands!" cried the old man—"up with 'em instant, or we'll both riddle you with bullets!"

Dazed with amazement, the second man was easily made prisoner, when the old man said:

"Gosh! ain't I glad I did come back? I tell you how it was, sissy; I seen these fellers behind them boulders up on the mounting when I rid over, an' I got to thinkin' 'bout 'em after you passed me, an' thinks to me, they wasn't the honestest lookin' men I ever seen now, an' they might do that little gal with the mail-bag harm. An' seein' you made me think 'bout my own little gal back in Missouri, an' how I'd feel if she was in your shoes, an' I kep' on thinkin' that way, till I jist felt I my plain jooty to go back an' see ye safe within sight o' the Cliff. When I got up on the mounting an' seen they'd gone, an' I hadn't met 'em comin' down 't'other side, I knowed that was mischiev brewin', an' I put out as fast as old Sol here would fetch me an' glad I am to get here as I did."

A party of miners with a burrow train on the way to Graniteville for ore came along a few minutes later, and two of them volunteered to assist Madge's rescuer in taking the hold-ups on to Eagle Cliff, where they were properly cared for in a way that kept them from doing any further harm.

The mail reached Eagle Cliff only a little behind time, and Madge was the heroine of the day.

The doctor offered to go in person to attend her father, and with him and the little old man as an escort she rode home in safety and triumph, to hear her father say:

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